

The Benevolent Polity: A Confucian Socio-Ethical Vision of Eldercare

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Abstract

Population aging and eldercare constitute a pressing major issue for more and more societies in Asia and worldwide. In China today, the age-old Chinese tradition of respecting and caring for the elderly faces numerous challenges (such as the shocking high rates of elderly suicides), challenges often associated with the country's one-child policy. Eldercare is first and foremost a moral undertaking; without a sound ethical vision, no society can develop adequate care for all its older people. To set out some elements of an ethical foundation for contemporary eldercare, this paper draws on classical Confucian moral and political thought articulated in Mengzi (Mencius), in particular the fundamental concepts of renzheng (benevolent polity or humane governance) and mingui (the importance of the people). The most salient practical feature of a benevolent polity lies in adequate care of the elderly. Contrary to certain pervasive misconceptions of Confucianism, a Confucian vision of ethical eldercare centres on the government or society's responsibilities to the people, including the elderly, the rights and dignity owing to them, and the primacy of morality. To elaborate on some implications of ancient Confucian thought for contemporary practices, a brief Confucian socio-ethical critique of population aging and eldercare in China today is also offered.

Keywords: Elderly care, ethics, Confucianism, Mengzi (Mencius), government's responsibilities, renzheng (benevolent polity), mingui (the importance of the people), China.

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The people are of supreme importance; the country and state come next;
the ruler is lightest.

Meng Zi (Mencius)

Tradition is the handing down the flame, not the worshipping of the ashes.

Gustav Mahler

One of the five legendary founding kings of Chinese civilisation, King Shun (舜), was revered in China as the embodiment of filial piety and humane polity. One millennium later came King Wen (文王 Wen Wang), who was posthumously anointed and also celebrated in Chinese culture, especially the Confucian moral and political tradition. Excellence in caring for the elderly was a salient feature of King Wen's rule, exemplifying the fundamental Confucian political ideal of benevolent polity. Over subsequent centuries, the notion of *jinglao yanglao* (敬老養老, respecting and caring for the elderly) evolved to become a core value of the Confucian belief system and social order, and became a characteristic norm of Chinese civilisation.

However, the venerable Chinese value of taking good care of the elderly faces numerous challenges in China today. More than 200 million people over the age of 60 are now living in China, nearly 15% of the total Chinese population and equivalent to the fifth most populous country in the world. While population aging and the problems associated with elderly care constitute a common issue for more and more societies in Asia and worldwide, the situation in China has been exacerbated by the unintended (and far-reaching) demographic and social consequences of the widely known "one-child policy". A vast number of academic—mostly demographic and sociological—studies exist on aging and eldercare in the Chinese context (e.g. Chen and Liu 2009, Wu 2013), but available literature on the ethical dimension of eldercare in China is limited.

Because eldercare is first and foremost a moral undertaking, no society can develop adequate levels of care for all its older people without a sound ethical vision. In order for China to acquire such a socio-ethical vision for effectively addressing eldercare in the aftermath of the one-child policy, this paper will argue that it is vital to revive Chinese cultural traditions such as classical Confucianism.

Confucianism Condemned and Stereotyped

While Confucianism had been the mainstream political, social, moral and spiritual system in China for more than two millennia, in the 20th century,

cultural iconoclasm or radical anti-traditionalism so pervaded socio-political and intellectual life that “down with the Confucian shop” became a popular slogan. Confucianism was condemned as the origin and defender of oriental despotism, a synonym for cultural and economic backwardness and the source of most of China’s problems. Since the late 1990s, in sharp contrast to the hostility shown under Mao’s regime, the Chinese government has shown itself increasingly favourable to Confucianism, although this turn to Confucianism has been primarily made to serve the official ideology amidst a growing crisis of political legitimacy.

Intellectually, like the advocacy of the heatedly debated “Asian values” thesis that originated in Singapore, the dominant official Chinese discourse has defined Confucianism in terms of unqualified loyalty and blind obedience owed by the people to the state. Under the spell of some popular stereotypical representations of Confucianism, and Chinese culture(s) in general, the Confucian moral and political outlook has been oversimplified as collectivist in nature, underscored by the obligation of individuals to secular authorities such as the government and state, thus serving as the “radical other” of the West—most typically today, the modern Western liberal tradition. It is widely assumed in the West and China as well that the spirit of Chinese, particularly Confucian, political thought has been authoritarian or paternalistic in essence, which metaphorises the country as a mega family with the Emperor and the governmental officials being the head and parents of the subjects.

These attributed beliefs might be broadly true of late imperial Confucianism and political practices in Chinese history, but they are absolutely not the case for *classical* Confucianism. Founded jointly by Kong Zi (Confucius, 551–479 BCE) and Meng Zi (Mencius, 4th–3rd century, BCE), Confucianism has been conventionally called “the *Dao* (Way) of Kong-Meng”. Along with Kong Zi’s *Lunyu* (*Analects*), the book *Mengzi*, authored by Meng Zi, is the most essential work for Confucianism. Although classical Confucianism has a large body of canonical literature, *Mengzi* serves as the intellectual source of this paper. Also, while there are enormous secondary works—ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign—on the political and moral thought of Meng Zi, the paper returns to the root, the original text of *Mengzi*. The doctrines of *renzheng* (仁政, humane polity or benevolent governance) and *mingui* (民貴, the importance of the people) articulated in *Mengzi* show compellingly that the central theme of classical Confucian moral and political thought is *the responsibilities of rulers or the government to the people including the elderly*, rather than the other way around, as this paper will demonstrate.

Renzheng (Benevolent Polity) and King Wen's Exemplary Governance

Mengzi is unquestionably the most influential treatise of political philosophy ever written in China. A number of rulers, including Meng Zi's contemporaries, are featured in this work, with most of them falling far short of his standards of practising good or even competent governance. There are nevertheless a few ancient kings who embody Meng Zi's high moral and political ideals. One of them is King Wen, who was also revered by Kong Zi, who saw himself as a spiritual heir of the virtuous ruler and charged by Heaven with transmitting the culture and civilisation associated with Wen to future generations.

According to *Mengzi*, a defining attribute of King Wen's reign was *shan yanglao* (善養老, excellence in taking good care of old people or knowing how to care for the elderly). Responding to questions about *renzheng* or *wangzheng* (王政, royal government or kingly governance), Meng Zi often refers to the example of King Wen, whose primary socio-political concern was to care for the abandoned and destitute:

There were the old and wifeless, or widowers [*guan*]; the old and husbandless, or widows [*gua*]; the old and childless, or solitaires [*du*]; the young and fatherless, or orphans [*gu*]:—these four classes are the most destitute of the people, and have none to whom they can tell their wants, and King Wen, in the institution of his government with its benevolent action, made them the first object of his polity, as it is said in the Book of Poetry, “The rich may get through life well; But alas for the miserable and solitary!”

(Book I, Part II, Chapter 5, Legge 1970: 162, with minor modifications)

At fifty, warmth cannot be maintained without silks, and at seventy flesh is necessary to satisfy the appetite. Persons not kept warm nor supplied with food are said to be starved and famished, but among the people of King Wen, there were no aged who were starved or famished”.

(Book VII, Part I, Chapter XXII, Legge 1970: 462)

Living at the end of the Yin Dynasty, King Wen (12th–11st century BCE) was known as Xibo Chang (西伯昌, Lord Chang of the West) during his lifetime; his title as king was conferred posthumously. As a result of his reputation for taking good care of the elderly, especially those without adequate family support, people from as far as the eastern coast and the northern parts of China—even recluses—followed him when he went into partially self-imposed exile in the remote west of the country in order to avoid the despotism of King Zhou.

At the core of Confucian political philosophy are the concepts of *renzheng*, *wangzheng* (kingly governance) and *wangdao* (王道, the kingly way), put forward by Meng Zi. King Wen was an exemplary ruler because, among other achievements, he exemplified these fundamental Confucian ideals through the measures he took to care for the elderly. A basic standard to judge if a ruler's governance conforms to the principles of *renzheng* is whether, in the words of Meng Zi, "all widowers, widows, orphans and the childless have been provided with adequate support and care" (鰥寡孤獨, 皆有所養, *guan gua gu du, jieyou suoyang*).

Realising the political and social ideals of Meng Zi, King Wen's governance improved his people's lives by providing employment and good education, lowering taxes and imposts, valuing the voice of the people, and eschewing draconian laws and harsh punishments. In one of his best-known passages, Meng Zi describes his vision of good community and society vividly:

Let mulberry trees be planted about the homesteads with their five *mu*, and persons of fifty years may be clothed with silk. In keeping fowls, pigs, dogs, and swine, let not their times of breeding be neglected, and persons of seventy may eat flesh. Let there not be taken away the time that is proper for the cultivation of the farm with its hundred *mu*, and the family of several mouths that is supported by it should not suffer from hunger. Let careful attention be paid to education in schools, inculcating in it especial the filial and fraternal duties, and grey-haired men will not be seen upon the roads, carrying burdens on their backs or on their heads. It never has been that the ruler of a State, when such results were seen,—persons of seventy wearing silk and eating flesh and the black-haired people suffering neither from hunger nor cold,—did not attain to the royal dignity.

(Book I, Part I, Chapter III, Legge 1970: 131–2)

This is not merely a poetic portrait of the idyllic life or a Chinese dream of Eden. Here Meng Zi details *renzheng* in action. The above text is fundamental in Meng Zi's political thought as it is repeated in almost the exact wording a few times in *Mengzi*. It is directly associated with many important ideas of Meng Zi's political and moral philosophy. In the context of today's elderly care, two points are accessible. First, clearly and to reiterate, a key aim and consequence of a benevolent polity promoted by Confucianism is that old people are adequately cared for. Second, the primary objective of governmental activity should not be to empower the state, but to empower people so that they can take good care of each other.

Meng Zi advocates an active role for rulers in protecting the vulnerable in sickness and old age and providing all citizens with a good education. Given this emphasis, he might well have lent his support to the ethical foundations

and socio-political practices of the welfare state, one of the greatest catalysts for social progress in human history. This being said, Meng Zi's political thought is not necessarily socialist or statist. In his key chapter on King Wen's provision for the elderly, Meng Zi has suggested some of the ways this was achieved:

The expression, "the chief of the West [i.e. King Wen] knows well how to nourish the old," refers to his regulation of the fields and dwellings, his teaching them to plan the mulberry and nourish those animals, and his instructing the wives and children, so as to make them nourish their aged.

(Book VII, Part I, Chapter 22, Legge 1970: 461–2)

It is thus critical that, in the process of providing adequate care for the elderly, the people, rather than the state authorities, should be empowered. The basic duty of any government and society is to empower the people, families and communities so that the aged in particular are looked after.

The humane or benevolent polity is a political ideal, but an achievable one, not an utopic vision. When a king excused himself for failing to exercise benevolent governance by blaming external restraints, Meng Zi refuted the claim by pointing out that this was not a case of his inability to act but of his failure to act—simply "not doing it". Meng Zi uses a couple of vivid analogies to underline his point: carrying the Mountain Tai across the north sea versus breaking off a branch from a tree for the elderly. While the former is a genuine impossibility, the latter is eminently achievable. Meng Zi thus says to the king, "Your Majesty's failure to practise benevolent governance is like the refusal to break off a branch from the tree" (Book I, Part I, Chapter 7, Legge 1970: 142–3, translation modified).

More importantly, from the viewpoint of ethics, *renzheng* is founded upon the primacy of morality. It demands that governments and rulers, and political life in general, should be subject to the higher authority of moral imperatives such as the *Dao*, *tian* (Heaven), *ren* (仁, humanity or humaneness) and *yi* (義, righteousness or justice). Therefore, to carry out a benevolent polity is not a preference for rulers, but a moral obligation. The political legitimacy of rulers is grounded on their fulfilling of this essential moral duty.

Responsibilities of the Government and Rights of the People

Meng Zi's concept of a benevolent polity and his political and social philosophy in general is based on his understanding of the duties and responsibilities proper to rulers and governments: loyalty to the moral principles of Confucianism on

one level and responsibilities to the people on another. As a political philosopher, Meng Zi is probably best known for his concept of the importance and value of the common people (民貴論, *mingui lun*). In the triad formed by the people, the kingdom and the ruler, he assigned the first place to the people and gave the ruler last place. In his justly famous words, “The people are the most important element in a nation; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the lightest” (Book VII, Part II, Chapter 14, Legge 1970: 483).

As a historian of political thought from China has aptly stated, Meng Zi believes that “the people are the masters and the ruler is their servant, and that the people are the essence and the state merely the function” (Hsiao 1979: 156). This being the case, “the government had the absolute duty of nourishing the people and maintaining peace and stability in the country, while the people did not have any duty of obedience to the government. If the government should fail in its responsibilities, then the people need not be loyal to it” (Ibid: 159).

If, according to Meng Zi, those who have no relatives and who cannot support themselves due to illness or old age are not provided with adequate care or, even worse, must resort to suicide as in China today (to be discussed below), then this is a clear indication that things are very close to a state of *baozheng* (暴政, despotic rule or tyranny), if not already there. When *renzheng* is an active force, as manifested in the rule of King Wen, people are attracted to good governance like water finding its natural level. Where *baozheng* is in the ascendant, those in power lose not only their political but also moral legitimacy, with the result that the people have the moral and political right to abandon and even overthrow the government.

In a powerful passage, Meng Zi devises two vibrant analogies for the duties of rulers and what should be done if such responsibilities are not fulfilled:

Meng Zi said to King Xuan of State Qi: “Suppose that one of your Majesty’s ministers were to entrust his wife and children to the care of his friend, while he himself went into State Chu to travel, and that, on his return, he should find that the friend had let his wife and children suffer from cold and hunger; —how ought he to deal with him?” The king said, “He should be cast off.”

Meng Zi proceeded, “Suppose that the chief criminal judge could not regulate the officers under him, how would you deal with him?” The king said, “Dismiss him.”

Meng Zi again said, “If within the four borders of your kingdom there is not good government, what is to be done?” The king looked to the right and left, and spoke of other matters.

(Book I, Part II, Chapter 7, Legge 1970: 164–5)

The message here is straightforward: the people have a fundamental right to dismiss their ruler or government if the basic political and moral duty of practising the benevolent polity has not been fulfilled.

If King Wen excelled at respecting and caring for the elderly and thereby created an example of excellent governance, his contemporary King Zhou—one of the most brutal dictators in Chinese history—was his foil. In fact, at one time Zhou had imprisoned and exiled King Wen. According to the great historical work *Shiji* (The Records of the Grand Historian) (Sima 1959: 105), King Zhou lacked any fear of Heaven and lived a thoroughly corrupt and dissipated life. In response to the complaints and rebellions of the people, he resorted to the harshest of punishments including one of his own devising, which involved slowly burning his victims to death. As a result of such misgovernance, his kingdom was overthrown by King Wen and his son King Wu.

From a Confucian ethical and political perspective, the revolution of Kings Wen and Wu was radically different from the familiar pattern of the overthrow of Chinese dynasties as seen later in the draconian rule of the First Emperor. The victory of Kings Wen and Wu over King Zhou symbolises the defeat of corrupt rulers, tyranny and inhumanity by the people, a new benevolent polity and humane ideals—in Meng Zi's terms, the victory of *renzheng* over *baozheng*.

Xiao (Filial Piety): A Matter of Dignity

The Chinese value and social practice of respecting and caring for the elderly has been an offshoot of the Confucian concept of *xiao* (孝, filial piety). Mostly due to the influence of Confucianism, filial piety has been developed into a cardinal virtue in Chinese culture and society so that no discussion of Confucian ethical and political thought on eldercare can afford to omit the role of *xiao*. While the family is universally a basic social unit, and respect for one's parents is a necessary virtue in every society, it seems that filial piety has nowhere else been emphasised to the degree it has in China, especially at times when Confucianism has played a leading role in Chinese culture. In the *Xiaojing* (孝經, The Classic of Filial Piety), *xiao* is defined as the foundation of morality, social life and civilisation—"the pattern of Heaven, the standard of the earth, the norm of conduct for the people". "Thus from the Son of Heaven to the common people, unless filial piety is pursued from beginning to end, calamities will surely result" (Ebrey 1993: 65).

There are, however, some popular misrepresentations of this leading Confucian virtue. One of them, which was already popular in the time of Kong Zi,

understood filial piety as demanding nothing more than providing one's parents with the necessary means of subsistence (养, *yang*). Yet, for Kong Zi, even dogs and horses can provide the necessities of life. What distinguishes human eldercare from that of animals, that is, genuine filial care, is the provision of means of subsistence with respect or reverence (敬, *jing*) (*Analects II*: 6).

The other major and longstanding misconception is that filial piety is mainly concerned with family affairs and children's responsibilities to their parents. Nevertheless, in Confucian thought, filial piety also entails the duties of rulers to their people. It should be noted that, metaphorically, here the parents are not the king or the government officials, but the people.

King Shun, another exemplary king featured in *Mengzi*, is praised for respecting and caring for his father and brother despite their abusive behaviour. More importantly, King Shun extended his practice of filial piety to the people of his kingdom. In advising a king on matters of humane governance, Meng Zi remarks:

Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others should be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others should be similarly treated (老吾老以及人之老, 幼吾幼以及人之幼): —do this, and the kingdom may be made to go round in your palm.

(Book I, Part I, Chapter 7, Legge 1970: 143)

Once again, the primary concern for Meng Zi is not so much the responsibilities of individuals, but rather the obligations of the ruler and the governing authorities to the people, including the elderly.

The Confucian definition of filial piety—not merely providing one's parents with the means of subsistence, but caring for them in a genuinely respectful way, and extending the concept to the wider society far beyond one's own family—means that eldercare is a matter of respecting and honouring the human dignity of the elderly. According to *Mengzi*, for people of every social stratum, this fundamental dignity is more valuable even than life itself:

Men have that which they like more than life, and that which they dislike more than death. They are not men of distinguished talents and virtue only who have this mental nature. All men have it. ... Here are a small basket of rice and a platter of soup, and the case is one in which the getting them will preserve life, and the want of them will be death;—if they are offered with an insulting voice, even a trampler will not receive them, or if you first tread upon them, even a beggar will not stoop to take them.

(Book VI, Part I, Chapter 10, Legge 1970: 412–3)

Indeed, as pointed out by a German sinologist and philosopher, the idea of “dignity within oneself” is essential for Meng Zi’s and thus classical Confucian moral and political thought (Roetz 1993, 1999). Moreover, as elaborated by a Hong Kong philosopher and bioethicist, Meng Zi’s notion of human dignity, i.e., “intrinsic quality of human beings quo being human”, can serve as an ethical foundation for long-term care for elderly people, especially in situations where their personhood and autonomy may be diminished due to dementia or old age (Tao 2004, 2007).

The Primacy of Morality

Eldercare is a moral challenge because what is being demanded of the state and society is not just providing care for this group, but doing the right thing for the right reason. In his well-known annotations to Confucian canonical classics which became standard textbooks in Chinese schools for nearly a millennium, the great neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130–1200) commented on Meng Zi’s discussion of King Wen’s outstanding provision of care for the elderly (Zhu 1985 [1190]: 56). He drew attention to the historical figure of Xiao He (蕭何 257–135 BCE), a minister of the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, who also excelled at caring for the elderly and attracting talented people to the imperial court. Zhu pointed out that, despite the positive consequences of their actions on the practical and political levels, King Wen and Minister He were inspired by radically different motivations. According to Zhu, it illustrated the difference between *gong* (公, the public or common interest) and *si* (私, self-interest). While for Minister He, taking good care of the elderly served merely as a means of gaining support from the people and securing power for himself, King Wen’s actions were motivated by the well-being of the elderly and the common interests of the people. For Zhu, this difference was crucial, something “one must be aware of”. The distinction between *gong* and *si* is one of the fundamental ones made in Confucian moral and political philosophy.

Once again, the primacy of morality highlights the moral obligations of the government or rulers to ethical principles as well as to the people. As Roetz (1993: 67) states, “Far more bluntly than the family, the state is submitted to the dictate of morals. Its legitimation depends on the achievement of social and ethical purposes.” The primacy of morality also means that the challenge posed by population aging and eldercare should not be defined as merely an economic or financial issue, however important that may be. The challenge is first of all an ethical one, one that cannot be effectively met without creative ethical investigation of the issue, backed by sound ethical visions.

The Failed Responsibilities of the Government: A Confucian Socio-Ethical Critique of Aging and Eldercare in China Today

The uniquely Chinese characteristics that mark the pressing challenges of a rapidly aging population and the crisis of eldercare in China are related—although not solely—to the one-child policy, a massive project of state-driven social engineering (Nie 2005, 2014). China's unprecedented population control policy has significantly accelerated the advent of an aging society, produced a radically altered population structure, and made the issues surrounding eldercare much more challenging than they would otherwise have been (Nie forthcoming). Serious problems China faces include the rapid growth of the oldest sector of the population ("the oldest of the old"), the increasing numbers of families who lose their only child, and the "4-2-1" family structure (two adult children caring for four aged parents).

Elsewhere, I have offered an in-depth socio-ethical inquiry into population aging with reference to China's one-child policy and the official approach to eldercare (Nie forthcoming). In this section, only a brief Confucian socio-ethical critique of aging and eldercare in China today will be offered. The purpose is to elaborate on a few more implications of Meng Zi's moral and political thought for contemporary practices of eldercare, concerning in particular the responsibilities of the government in this area.

If King Shun, King Wen, Kong Zi and Meng Zi were living in today's China, they would be happily surprised by the progress achieved by humankind, including China, over the intervening centuries. But they would be appalled by the large-scale social suffering associated with the national birth control programme, the disturbing high and increasing suicide rates of the elderly, and the failed duties of the government and state as well as society in providing adequate care for old Chinese people.

Globally, suicide has long been a major public health issue; in China, suicides constitute the fifth leading cause of death. It is particularly alarming that the incidence of suicide among the elderly has been rapidly rising. One recent nationwide study of suicide in China for the years of 2002–11 shows that, while in general suicide rates have been declining over the past two decades or so, self-inflicted deaths among the elderly have been increasing dramatically. It found that suicide rates increased with age and peaked in the oldest group (i.e., the older the cohort, the higher the rate); victims aged 65 and over accounted for 44% of all suicides (Wang, Chang and Yip 2014). Even more

disturbingly, suicide rates among the rural elderly, males in particular, are much higher than for their urban counterparts and the national average—three to five as high, or even more (Li, Xiao and Xiao 2009). The rural elderly in the 80–84 age group are killing themselves at more than ten times the rate for middle-aged Chinese, and those aged 85+ at almost 20 times (Wang, Chang and Yip 2014).

Partly in order to justify and defend the one-child policy in face of international as well as domestic criticism, in the 1980s and 1990s the official Chinese discourse regularly downplayed the issue of population aging and was over-optimistic about the challenges posed by eldercare. As the issue has become increasingly pressing, in recent years the Party-Government has finally begun to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem and taken a series of measures aimed at enhancing eldercare. The centrepiece of eldercare in contemporary China is the national “Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly” (promulgated in 1996, and revised in 2009 and 2012). Its stated aim of developing eldercare in the general framework of human rights is definitely commendable. One of the gross stereotypes that has long circulated regarding Confucianism and Chinese culture(s) holds that the universal norms of human rights and human dignity are culturally alien to China. But they are embedded in traditional Chinese belief systems such as Confucianism and Daoism. Although not expressed in the contemporary language of human rights, the rights of a ruler’s subjects, including the elderly, are clearly conveyed in *Mengzi* as presented above. Under pressure from both its own people and the international community, the Chinese Party-Government has embraced the concept of human rights, albeit often in the form of mere lip service. Rooted in Chinese culture, the law for the elderly is one of such major advances in the broad area of human rights in China.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of Confucian ethics, the official Chinese approach to eldercare has some major deficits. Some salient features of the official approach include: defining eldercare mostly as an economic or financial problem; placing the primary responsibility on individuals and families; and in general treating eldercare as a matter of charity (in the common sense of the term as the voluntary, but not duty-bound, giving of money or help to those in need). For Confucian moral and political thought, an officially endorsed but popular charity-oriented approach to social welfare, known as “caring for weak groups”, is ethically misleading because it is not rooted in *jing* and *ren* or genuine respect for the rights and dignity of the people. For classical Confucianism, the state has an essential responsibility to take good care of the elderly.

The disturbing suicides rate of old people in China, especially in rural areas, is a distressing demonstration that the Chinese government has failed in this duty. In the early 21st century, the official Chinese approach to the greying of the population can be summarised by the catchphrase: “growing old before getting rich”. Yet, treating eldercare as principally an economic issue merely serves to justify the grossly inadequate allocation of resources to it, based on the inability of the government and society to achieve more due to economic restraints. Although total expenditure on healthcare and social welfare has been increasing as a result of China’s economic miracle, the proportion of Chinese government expenditure in these areas has been consistently much lower than the averages of international figures, and not just among the developed welfare states (e.g. Zhao 2011, WHO 2014, Nie forthcoming). Thus, in Meng Zi’s terms, the failure to provide adequate levels of care to the aged in China is not a case of the state’s inability to act, but rather of its “not doing it”.

Moreover, according to the Confucian primacy of morality, the motivation of the Chinese authorities in developing eldercare needs to be rectified. In the China of the early 21st century, the official approach to eldercare resembles that of Xiao He rather than King Wen. Continuing the legacy of Deng Xiaoping, the post-Deng leadership has focused attention on improving standards of living through developing the economy and providing social welfare. However, just as Mao’s policies were all directed toward the ultimate goal of gaining, consolidating and expanding the power to control Chinese society and the Chinese people, Deng’s pursuit of reform and openness was primarily driven by a desire to restore the legitimacy of the Communist Party-Government that had sustained some devastating blows under Mao’s regime. In its approach to the delivery of eldercare, the present government is addressing the issues involved in order to achieve the same ultimate goal of maintaining the status quo, ensuring that political, economic, social and cultural power in China will remain with the Party. The reversal of official attitudes to Confucianism also serves the same political goal. In great neo-Confucian Zhu Xi’s words, all this is done for *si*, rather than *gong*, or for self-interest of one party, not common interest and good of the people.

The Chinese authorities appear to increasingly favour Confucianism. In the area of eldercare, even if the basic official approach does not reform according to the principles of classical Confucian moral and political philosophy, this approval of Confucianism amounts to, to say the least, a modern case of “*ye gong hao long*” (Lord Ye’s love of dragons), i.e., professed love of what one really fears and has no will to fulfil.

Conclusion

To help create ethical visions for China to develop adequate eldercare in an increasingly aging society, in this paper I have drawn on classical Confucian moral and political philosophy presented in *Mengzi*. Adequate eldercare constitutes a key practical feature or socio-political consequence of the fundamental Confucian political norms of *renzheng* (a benevolent polity) and *minggui* (the importance and value of the common people). Contrary to popular misconceptions of Confucianism, a Confucian socio-ethical vision of eldercare is centred on the responsibilities of the government and the state to the elderly, respect for the rights and dignity of the elderly, and the primacy of morality. This vision completely accords with the general spirit of Meng Zi's political thought, which highlights the duties of the rulers on the one hand, and the rights of the people on the other. No wonder that some of the highest rulers in Chinese history, including Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty) and Mao Zedong in the 20th century, loathed Mengzi's thought and censored or banned his work.

As mentioned earlier, I have presented a socio-ethical critique of population aging and eldercare in today's China elsewhere (Nie forthcoming). In that paper, I highlighted the failed responsibilities of the government and the inadequacy of the contemporary official Chinese approach to eldercare. That paper defines eldercare as first of all a moral endeavour, not merely an economic problem; emphasises the duty of care that falls on the government and state, not just individuals and families; and treats eldercare as a matter of social justice, human dignity and human rights, not merely private and public charity. In the present paper, I have laid out the ethical and cultural justification of that critique. Taken together, these two papers offer not only a Confucian socio-ethical critique of eldercare in China against the background of the one-child policy, but also some essential elements of a Confucian vision of ethical eldercare considered in a broader socio-cultural context.

Due to the scope of this paper, some important issues had to be omitted. First, I limited discussion to the societal level of eldercare, in particular the government's responsibilities in this area. Nevertheless, care of the elderly is ultimately a personal (and interpersonal) activity, and supportive and nurturing communities are indispensable for any adequate eldercare. Confucian wisdom and thought can offer meaningful ethical frameworks and fresh insights to the interpersonal and communal aspects of eldercare alike. Second, no in-depth philosophical exploration of a Confucian ethical vision of eldercare has been

offered. Some pioneering works on this dimension have appeared (e.g., Tao 2004, 2007) and more systematic studies are much needed.

This paper has focused on the implications of Mengzi's political and ethical thought for eldercare in China. But Confucianism can greatly enrich, among others, intellectual inquiries into the moral foundations of the elderly beyond China. It has something important to contribute to the emerging global moral discourse of eldercare, practically and theoretically. Partly due to obvious and significant cross-cultural differences not only in time and space but in ideas and styles of argument, Confucianism and Chinese culture(s) have frequently been characterised as the "radical other" of the West. However, as this paper has indicated, there exist fascinating transcultural similarities or commonalities as well. Some striking and profound similarities between classical Confucianism and Kant's moral philosophy—one of the most influential ethical theories in the West—are also evident, in spite of apparent differences. They include similarities between the concepts of *renzheng* and *mingui* and the notion of humanity, as the ultimate end (and not just the means) of the moral kingdom; between the concepts of *ren* and *jing* and the idea of human dignity; as well as the distinction between *si* and *gong* in the context of eldercare, or pragmatic actions versus those undertaken for the sake of a moral law or duty. Nevertheless, it is out of this paper's scope to elaborate on any of these similarities and differences between Confucian and Kantian ethics on eldercare and other bioethical issues (for insightful studies by two German sinologist-philosophers, see Roetz 1993, Döring 2004, 2015). The point I want to make here is that, rather than the radical "other" of the West, Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism) and other Chinese cultural traditions belong not to China alone, but to humankind, and are often universalistic in nature (Nie 2011, 2015a, 2015b). As a result, genuine transcultural dialogues on eldercare and other bioethical issues are not only necessary but possible and fruitful.

By all means, however turbulent the historical and political reality of China since the early 20th century has been, and however daunting the challenge of contemporary eldercare in China may be, the Chinese tradition of respecting and caring for the elderly—a tradition going back over four millennia—and the Confucian socio-ethical vision of the benevolent polity shall not perish in China and from the world.

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